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ABSTRACT

A collaborative faculty project was something of a failure for one instructor. About a year ago, the instructor invited everyone in the department to meet in her office every third week to talk about teaching literature and composition. The immediate concern was the use of writing in three general education literature courses that had been designated as "writing emphasis" courses: members of the discussion group wanted to exchange ideas about the types of writing that were possible in general education literature courses that were listed as part of the writing program. Beyond the exchange of ideas, the group functioned as a pedagogic encounter group where adjunct, tenured, or tenure-track faculty could testify or complain. Every meeting gathered about 6 or 7 department members, but by the end of the semester, people in the department started to drop notes of apology when they could not attend. The potential for this group to materialize into a grassroots effort with some political power and the promise of curricular reform seemed enormous. So what went wrong? Its goals were to initiate a common departmental language and to channel discursive energy into curricular revision. These were very specific goals, but they were complicated by the choice of a common language. Though most attending were composition scholars, the common language was not that of rhetoric and composition. Critical theory is an elite language and a highly contested one, and therefore the common language was one that was essentially conflicted. (TB)

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Composition in Literature:
A Collaborative Model of Writing Program Administration

Last week was spring break week in Wisconsin. During the break I was speaking with the daughter of an acquaintance who attends a branch campus of the University of Wisconsin system. In addition to amazing me with her willingness to confess that she slept through most of her classes, she said something that reflects on the title of this paper--"composition in literature." She told me that, as part of her general education requirements, it was necessary to enroll in, in her words, "one English class and one composition class." I think that, in the context of this panel and this conference, that comment will be understood for what it says about our field: obviously composition does not seem like "English." In this paper, I'd like to work with that implied dichotomy of English and composition, but rather than discuss institutional status, I'd like to examine the ways in which the posited opposition of English and composition influence and inhibit representations of professional selves.

There will always be a dichotomy between composition and literature as long as there is a language in English that counts as greater symbolic capital. The border between the two fields

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is not one identified by an objective set of texts and practices, but one that is linguistic in nature. In English, the current language of power is the language of philosophy and critical theory (one needs only to count the number of articles calling for a revitalization of practice, storytelling, and teacher talk to determine that those modes of discourse are devalued in the field). Critical discourse is powerful particularly because it is accessible to the few: to those who have been initiated in its discourse and those with the leisure to read its discourse. The discourse of critical theory is easily dismissed, but not easily imitated; it sets forth a series of concepts that are easily ridiculed, but not easily understood.

While many of the thinkers and writers in composition are versed and fluent in critical theory, many of the practitioners are assumed to have a deficit of this symbolic capital. When offered the opportunity to build a common language between literature and composition in our department, for example, we defaulted to the doxa, critical theory. This essay will recount some of our struggles to bridge the gap, but at present, composition seems to be struggling from below: it is not in literature at our institution, but in the dim and pea-green basement classrooms of our own Polk Library.

While my announced subject is "a collaborative model of writing program administration," I'm about to reflect on a collaborative project that was actually something of a failure. About a year ago (before I became Director of Composition) I

invited everyone in the department to meet in my office every third week to talk about teaching literature and composition. We had food and drink, cheese and crackers, fruit, wine. They were BYOC parties: bring your own chair. Our immediate concern was the use of writing in three general education literature courses that had been designated some years before as "writing emphasis" courses: we wanted to exchange ideas about the types of writing that were possible in general education literature courses that were listed as part of the Writing Program. Beyond the exchange of ideas, the group functioned as a pedagogic encounter group where adjunct, tenured, or tenure-track faculty could testify or complain (with loquaciousness probably enhanced by the wine.) Every meeting gathered about six or seven department members. By the end of the semester, people in the department started to drop notes of apology when they couldn't attend.

The potential for this group to materialize into a grassroots effort with some political power seemed enormous. The curriculum revision project only just underway in the department could take advantage of the group discussions to work from the inside out by learning about people's classrooms through anecdote and story; there was a time allowed for discussion of teaching as it actually was taking place in the classroom, and not as the administration would have it done; there was discussion, based on the conversations of this group, about altering our series of general education literature courses to better accommodate the blurring of genres and nationalities that was already occurring

in the three courses (which are labeled Modern American, Modern British, and Modern World Literature). What subsequently occurred was quite different: with the new school year, the group became formalized into a reading group on critical theory.

The reading group was intended to complement the teaching interest group and not to supplant it. Its goals were to initiate a common departmental language and to channel discursive energy into curricular revision. These were very specific goals, and they were complicated by the choice of common language. First, although the majority of instructors participating in the reading group were composition staff members, the common language was not the language of rhetoric or composition. Second, critical theory is an elite language and a contested language in English studies, and therefore, the common language became one that was essentially conflicted. I hardly need to refer to the many "resistances to theory" in academic and popular writing, as they are now canonical. I can, however, offer some background about the specific, local resistance to theory that informed departmental discourse for many years. "Why I Hate to Write" was composed by a former colleague and published in the journal of the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English:

> Academic writing too often cloaks the old or the banal in new jargon and ever more intimidatingly convoluted prose styles. . . . [I] fear that I don't write complexly and obscurely (or badly) enough to get published. This is a fear that several of my colleagues have also expressed . .

> Of course, I rage and gnash my teeth at all the badly written academic books I must read to keep up, however superficially, with my field. But books like these are being published, and my only guess is that most people in academia are too intimidated to say (and write) what they think which would be expressed something like this: "We don't know what all the jargon means." (Fitzgerald 34)

It is evident that, while this writer has convinced herself that much academic writing is pretense, she can't meet the rather widespread, professional pretense with a pretense of her own, professionally constructing herself as a potentially satirical player within a pretentious linguistic game. Her professional representation of self is earnest, tense, and self-effacing. She is convinced that linguistic rules have placed her in the ghetto. Despite her cynicism and defeated tone, however, this former colleague touches on a very real issue: the ability for language and speech situations to delineate those occupying a central place in "English" from those at the margins. A critical theory reading group replaces the familiar themes and casual styles of local knowledge with a regulated Ruskinian dialogue, in which everyone's verbal reach is expected to exceed their grasp. Inculcating colleagues in the discourse of critical theory is an effort at cultural reproduction by the heterodoxy, those who experience critical theory as a self-evident mode of speech in English.

Beyond attempting to construct a common language, the

critical theory reading group was part of a conscious project to reshape the conception of "English" as it is deployed in our department. We intend to revise the course offerings as well as influence individual text selection. At a practical level, there is an implicit promise that critical theory will enhance teaching. At the same time, there is an implicit threat that critical theory will change the social space of the department.

Informing curricular and interpretive struggles are consciously fashioned representations of professorial selves: various performances of identity that incarnate an entire language of fashion, gesture, habitual behavior, and discourse, and which are supported by various conceptions of "English." They work at the mythic level, leading from representations of "the teacher" in the cultural text that is comprised of literature, film, and feature stories in the newspaper and papers at this conference (consider the tweed jacket, the absent-minded professor, and the Oxford-model don whose office is lined with clothbound tomes and the ones invoked in the past few days at this conference: teacher as friend and teacher as therapist). Thus, a college professor does not "teach" in any objective or disinterested sense, does not manufacture a system of study centered on a textbook or works of literature, but actually executes a complex act of field interpretation that draws from a wide range of cultural productions to become self. As the colleague whom I quoted above notes in that same article: "Each year, I become more and more convinced that effective writing has

everything to do with self-esteem and personal and professional success" (34). Eventually, one realizes that the social space of the department, the personal, and the curricular have become fused.

Like the production and enactment of a professorial self, the original teaching interest group operated at the mythological level, the level of lore, providing a space for multiple discourses, multiple representations of self, and representations of "English" that placed composition in the center. On the other hand, because it imposed a particular discourse and demanded a certain level of understanding, the theory reading group asked for a specific performance of self and more readily encountered--and could less easily accommodate--resistance. Those who resisted theory simply dismissed theory and didn't attend. The "common language" that prefaces curricular redesign must be chosen with care. Resistance to curricular restructuring involves a fear of loss of a professional identity and of a field that one recognizes. (The overwhelming sense of loss that can be experienced with the alteration of the social and discursive space of "English" was painfully illustrated by the recent curricular modifications at one of our sister institutions. Abolishing the requirement for undergraduate English majors to take Chaucer resulted in the near suicide of the Chaucer professor, a elderly man with a long grey beard who had devoted his life to the study and teaching of Chaucer's works, a man who used hand puppets made of styrofoam cups to act out the roles of

the Canterbury pilgrims, a man whose chief pedagogical tool was his sidekick cartoon frog, Ribute.)

There is very little time for extra initiatives at our institution, and thus the teaching interest group met its end as the reading group began. Recently, however, one of our colleagues suggested translating the face to face teaching group into an e-mail discussion list for the department. There would be no food, of course, unless you set your own glass of wine down next to your modem, and there would be no need to gather chairs, but participants could post problems or successes and respond to ideas at their leisure, at four in the morning or two in the afternoon. While it is convenient and certainly a viable alternative as a sort of in-house journal, an e-mail discussion about pedagogy retains the high stakes atmosphere of the critical theory reading group. As an apparatus of the institution, an e-mail discussion is regulated by rules of public discourse in which the threat of contract renewal and promotion and tenure make it difficult to complain about students or admit failure in the classroom, two essential tropes of pedagogic discussions. As Kathleen Boardman has written in the recent issue of the WPA Journal, when it is institutionally authorized, storytelling can be construed as "a tool of surveillance" and thus, the same storytellers who are anxious to gossip when marginalized in offices with a paper plate of cheese and a few Ritz crackers next to them, are reluctant to talk when the forum is authorized by a centralized academic power (30). Further complicating the issue

is the recent attempt by the University of Wisconsin system to determine whether e-mail transmissions are open to the public under the public records law, a decision which would constitute further centralized regulation of speech.

Thus, as a model for "collaborative administration," a teaching interest group can only be successful in the absence of a centralized mode of discourse. Every participant must have the freedom to bring themselves--and their field of "English"-- to the discussion, and to tell stories. In the case of the teaching interest group, stories were powerful <u>because</u> they were marginalized.

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